

Pastrana in Washington

Colombian president asks for \$1.5 billion in military aid

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Colombian President Andres Pastrana's visit to Washington last week has set the stage for a major escalation of the US political and military intervention in the South American country.

Pastrana used his US tour to unveil a "plan for peace, prosperity and the strengthening of the state" which is heavily dependent on a massive infusion of US military aid together with increased loans from the International Monetary Fund and other international banking agencies. The thrust of the plan is the attempt to carry out a military solution to the longstanding and intense social contradictions that have left Colombia mired in a state of semi-civil war for more than half a century.

The Colombian president attempted to sell his plan in Washington by proclaiming that drug trafficking is "the main enemy of peace" in his country and promoting the idea that countries that produce drugs and those that consume them must join together in a common effort to eradicate this social plague.

In reality, this tack is itself the product of considerable pressure exerted by Washington on the Pastrana government over the past several months, with repeated visits to the country by Clinton's "drug czar" General Barry McCaffrey, the chief of the US Army Southern Command, General Charles Wilhelm, and other high-ranking US military and political figures.

After coming to office in August 1998, Pastrana emphasized his desire to reach a negotiated settlement with the country's oldest and largest guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish acronym FARC. He granted certain concessions to the guerrillas, including a "demilitarized zone" in south-central Colombia which the FARC effectively controlled. The US has pushed the Pastrana government to pursue a more aggressive military strategy

while criticizing the policy of concessions.

Colombia's government is requesting \$1.5 billion in military aid from the US over the next three years, a sharp increase from the \$287 million that was provided over the past year, which already made the country the recipient of the third-largest package of US arms assistance, trailing only behind Israel and Egypt. With these funds, the Colombian military would modernize its A-37 fighter jets, purchase additional attack helicopters and assemble and train three more "anti-drug battalions" to be used against the guerrillas. The Colombian military command's aim is to double the number of professional soldiers in its army to 60,000 over the next four years, while increasing the total headcount of the armed forces from 130,000 to 159,000.

There is little doubt that the Colombian request will receive favorable treatment, given that the amount of aid and its purpose have already been worked out through extensive talks between US and Colombian officials.

"We applaud the GOC's [Government of Colombia's] strategy as an ambitious, but realistic, package of mutually reinforcing policies," State Department spokesman James Rubin said in a statement. "The US Government will carefully review Colombia's request for international assistance and, in consultation with Congress, develop proposals on how the US can best assist the GOC."

The US military role in Colombia is set to expand sharply. Already, more than 50 US Army Special Forces "advisers" are engaged in training the first 950-man anti-drug battalion. Other US personnel have set up and are operating a network of intelligence-gathering radar stations across Colombia. These electronic listening posts have played a key role in coordinating the offensives carried out by the Colombian military against the FARC

guerrillas.

Republicans in Congress have voiced support for even more military assistance than what the Pastrana government has requested or the Clinton administration has offered. They have conditioned this inflated military package, however, on demands that the Colombian government end all concessions to the FARC.

"Support for increased military aid to Colombia should be dependent on the restoration of government access to the narco-guerrillas' 16,000-square-mile zone of impunity," declared Rep. Benjamin Gilman (R-N.Y.), chairman of the House International Relations Committee, after meeting with Pastrana.

While the Clinton administration—echoed by the Pastrana government—has couched its proposals for increased aid to Colombia in terms of an internationalized "war on drugs," it is clear that the main target of increased US military aid will be the Colombian guerrilla movements.

These movements, both the FARC and the smaller ELN, or National Liberation Army, undoubtedly have drawn considerable resources from their connections with drug cultivators and exporters from whom they collect "taxes" and to whom they at times offer protection. In a crisis-ridden and largely impoverished country where cocaine trafficking has become a key source of income, the guerrillas are hardly unique in skimming money from the drug trade. Right-wing paramilitary groups and even bourgeois politicians have likewise received cash infusions from drug traffickers.

Only a fraction of the violence that has plagued Colombia, claiming as many as 25,000 lives a year and turning hundreds of thousands more people into refugees, can be attributed to the guerrilla movements. The US State Department itself recognized recently that "the armed forces committed numerous, serious human rights abuses," and spoke of the Colombian military running "a system that has established an almost unbroken record of impunity" with regards to the killing of civilians.

Such reports have not stopped the CIA and the Pentagon from continuing to work with the Colombian military. General Wilhelm, the chief of the Southern Command, signaled Washington's real attitude by declaring last year that criticism of Colombia's armed forces for human rights violations was "unfair" because the guerrillas carried out even more atrocities. Aimed at softening restrictions on military aid to Colombian forces that have engaged in massacres and allied themselves with right-wing death squads, Wilhelm's statement represented a

gross falsification of the real situation in the country.

While the nature of the multi-sided civil war makes an exact accounting of Colombia's carnage difficult, all objective assessments have pointed to the heaviest toll being exacted by the military and its paramilitary allies. According to the Center for Research and Popular Education and the Intercongregational Commission of Justice and Peace, two human rights groups in Colombia, out of 619 people known to have been assassinated for political reasons in the first six months of 1998, 73 percent of the killings were the work of the right-wing paramilitary bands allied with the army. Seventeen percent were attributed to the guerrillas and 10 percent to the military and police.

In many cases, however, it is difficult to tell where the killings by the paramilitaries end and those carried out by the army begin. "Witnesses frequently state that [massacres] were perpetrated by members of the armed forces passing themselves off as paramilitaries, joint actions by members of the armed forces or police and paramilitaries, or actions by paramilitaries enjoying the complicity, support or acquiescence of the regular forces," according to the Bogota office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in a report issued last year.

The ongoing plans for a massive expansion of US military aid to the Pastrana government and the Colombian armed forces are certain to involve Washington and US forces in a "dirty war" of massacres, death squads and torture against the Colombian people. Pastrana's protestations about Colombian sovereignty notwithstanding, the stage is being set for the direct intervention of the US military in a Vietnam-style war on the South American continent.



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